

EPA releases strategy to clean up West Lake

- **\$205 million cost** is \$30 million cheaper than plan outlined in February
- **Cleanup to take** 4½ years, one year faster than estimated previously
- **Excavation depth** to vary between 8 and 20 feet, rather than 16 feet

BY BRYCE GRAY

St. Louis Post-Dispatch

After years of bureaucratic inaction and escalating frustration and concern from the surrounding community, the Environmental Protection Agency has finally settled on a strategy to clean up the radioactive waste at the West Lake Landfill Superfund site in Bridgeton.

Compared with a proposal from earlier this year, the selected remedy is about \$30 million cheaper and will be completed about one year faster.

The agency said late Wednesday that it would slightly modify its earlier proposal to partly remove the site's contamination, employing "more flexibility" by digging to varying depths to target spots where radioactivity is concentrated. The strategy is outlined

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in a record of decision, set to be signed Thursday morning in Washington by the agency's acting administrator, Andrew Wheeler.

The announcement caps years of anticipation and fierce debate. Concerned area residents have strongly called for full excavation of the site and remote disposal of its contents — the most thorough, and expensive, cleanup possible — while some groups responsible for covering remediation costs sought to have the site capped, which was the least expensive option weighed by the EPA.

The chosen plan falls between those two options, and closely resembles the proposal put forward in February. That strategy, announced by former EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt, was dubbed "Excavation Plus," and entailed partial removal of the site's radioactive contaminants, followed by installation of a specially engineered cover as a form of long-term protection.

That proposal called for excavation to a depth of 16 feet across the site, which agency officials said would remove the bulk of the site's radioactivity. Now, however, excavation depth will vary between 8 feet and 20 feet below the landfill's surface.

"We're going to have more flexibility as we excavate," Wheeler said Wednesday in a phone interview with the Post-Dispatch. "In some areas, it will be as deep as 20 feet or perhaps as shallow as 8 feet. We're going to decrease the amount of nonradioactive waste that needs to be removed from the site and focus our efforts on the radioactive waste."

Agency officials said about 70 percent of the radioactivity at the site would be removed. They said radioactivity that



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The West Lake Landfill in Bridgeton in 2012.

remains in the unlined landfill will be at a depth where it is not expected to pose public health risks, and that groundwater will be monitored going forward.

The estimated \$205 million cost will be shouldered by a handful of public and private entities deemed "potentially responsible parties" that are liable for the site. The EPA said that allocation of those costs is decided among those parties, and "may not necessarily be evenly divided."

Those entities include Republic Services — the company that operates the landfill through a subsidiary — the U.S. Department of Energy and Chicago-based Exelon Corp., whose subsidiary, ComEd, formerly owned the uranium processor, Cotter Corp.

The cleanup process is estimated to take

about four and a half years to complete. About 18 months will be spent in a "design phase" while excavation and landfill cover construction is expected to take three years. The agency said it does not have a precise time frame but aims to begin the design phase "as soon as possible" and that it "will make every effort to get an enforceable agreement in place to fund and perform the design."

The contamination removed from the site will be sent to an out-of-state site for disposal. EPA officials said that licensed facilities in Utah, Idaho, Michigan and Colorado were under consideration.

Wheeler emphasized that on-site and off-site safety would be priorities throughout the cleanup process. Considerations ranged from controlling dust to

repelling birds from the open landfill.

"The most important thing are the concerns of people who live around the site," said Wheeler.

Radioactive waste stemming from the Manhattan Project in World War II was illegally dumped at the landfill in the 1970s. Although the site was added to the EPA Superfund program's National Priorities List in 1990, it has languished for decades without the start of any remediation work.

Public scrutiny and concern about the site has exploded since 2010, when an underground fire — called a "subsurface smoldering event" by officials — was detected in the adjacent Bridgeton Landfill. The fire has come to within several hundred yards of known radioactive contamination at West Lake, and has been slowed by an engineered cooling system that runs pipes into the landfill.

Though the EPA has never begun work to remediate West Lake, the agency reached a record of decision for the site once before, in 2008. That decision called for leaving contaminants in place and installing a cap over the site, but was re-evaluated and ultimately rescinded amid public backlash.

Wheeler said that, this time, the measure was "set in stone."

"We want to move forward in getting this cleaned up," he said.

"We spent a lot of time studying this site over the years. ... We spent quite a bit of time this year looking at the proposal and the issues raised," Wheeler added. "What we've come up with, we believe, is a better approach."

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